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Pages from a Someday Book

by J. N. Hook

English in the Space Age

Time is defeating space. In a few hours a man may cross the Atlantic; in a few minutes an earth satellite or a missile with an atomic explosive may cover the same distance; in a fraction of a second a human voice or a picture may be heard or seen thousands of miles away.

This age, we are told, is the Age of Technology, the Age of Science, the Atomic Age, the Space Age. This, the optimists say, is the Age of Endless Frontiers. This, the pessimists say, is the Age of Annihilation, the Age of the Last Man.

Human beings have felt themselves shrinking as they have learned more about the tininess of their earth as measured by the measureless stretches of the void but thinly sprinkled with suns. Once man could believe that he inhabited the center of the universe, and that he himself was the principal preoccupation of God. Now it is easier to believe that he is an almost invisible dot on a pebble.

When man thinks of his relations with his fellows, it is easy to despair. He says, "I want to live long, and I want my children to live forever." But his actions contradict his words. A mad, apparently irrepressible death-urge is upon him. If lemmings could talk, perhaps they would discuss summer sunshine as they rush to drown themselves in frigid waters.

Paradoxically—and this is only a truism—science has given man a choice between destroying himself and enjoying for the first time in his history ample food, clothing, and shelter, as well as ample hours to play and to meditate and to explore beyond un-

dreamed horizons. Science has given man the opportunity to choose, but man must make the choice. Science cannot.

Perhaps no lemming can stop the lemmings, and perhaps no man can stop man. Churches are trying, but some nations and many persons are godless. A few leaders are trying, but their cries are engulfed in the shouts for more destructive weapons.

Perhaps, if this turns out *not* to be the Age of the Last Man, the teachers of the humanities will be given some of the credit. Not just North American teachers of the humanities—such conceit ill becomes us—but also European, Asian, African, Australian, Central and South American.

For the humanist has a vision—or should have. He does not know exactly how to attain his vision. He is trying to define a purpose in life, and if he is wise he will never attempt to impose his purpose on someone else. But he keeps groping toward his vision, and as a teacher he encourages others to grope toward theirs.

The teacher of English is a humanist, and should wear the badge proudly. He should have his vision, his ideals, his hopes. His mind must extend beyond the covers of a textbook, beyond the four walls of a room. He has a job to do. But he needs vision to do that job well, a vision that shows him clearly the distinction between semicolons and sonnets, between a unit and unity, between means and ends. In an age when the life of man is the stake, success on the part of one teacher in distinguishing between the trivial and the vital may affect the decision.

Adjustment

"Adjusting themselves socially" does not mean and must not mean reduction of individual initiative; it must not mean the extreme versions of well-intentioned but sometimes actually harmful "life adjustment" programs. The future of democracy depends upon our having large numbers of persons who adjust life instead of adjusting to life. That is, we need persons who see the weaknesses of the status quo and who will try in lawful ways to remedy the weaknesses. The great leaders, the great innovators of all time have not been adjusted to, i.e., satisfied with, life as they found it: consider Socrates, da Vinci, Galileo, Rousseau, Washington, Lincoln, Edison, and the two Roosevelts as only a few examples of nonconformists. The teacher needs to seek ways of simultaneously encouraging individuality and cooperativeness, of distinguishing individuality from anarchy, of teaching respect for others who do not completely conform in dress or in habits of thought and speech.

Structural Linguistics

The structural linguists argue cogently that the traditional system of English grammar is weak because (a) it is based on Latin grammar, whereas English is a Teutonic language; (b) it describes the written language, whereas the real, basic language is spoken; (c) it is full of inconsistencies, half-truths, and outright falsehoods. There is unquestionable merit in each of these arguments.

However, the best methods of applying the findings of the structural linguists are still to be found. Experiments are being conducted on both the high school and the college levels. Each year new textbooks are published, of greater or less degrees of complexity.

Perhaps the outstanding contribution of the structural linguists so far has been to call forcefully to the attention of English teachers the relative simplicity of structure of the English sentence. On the other hand, the strongest objection to much of what has been done is that one method of linguistic description is being substituted for another without adequate attention to its applications to writing. A structural linguist was asked, "Do your students write better after studying your method?" He answered, honestly, "No, I don't see any significant differences." The third person present, a structural linguist, was offended by the question. He said, "It doesn't matter whether they write better or not. The important thing is that they learn the truth about our language." The fourth person present, whom we shall call the Innocent Bystander, mused, "Maybe it doesn't matter whether they write better or not. Perhaps structural linguistics is still an almost-pure science, whose applications are yet hardly visible. Possibly it may some day provide a key for vastly improved language teaching. Right now, though, we need to do everything we can to teach boys and girls to speak and write as well as possible. I want to borrow from the structural linguists whatever help they can provide me for that purpose. Meanwhile I hope that they will go on with both their basic research and their attempts to apply their findings. And I want to keep myself informed about what they are doing."

How Not to Teach Literature

Let us pay imaginary visits to five places where we shall observe horrible things being done either to literature or to children or to both.

First we go to The Playhouse. In The Playhouse everything is fun. Oh, how everyone enjoys himself! All the children dance

and sing, and everything is a game. The teacher is a master of ceremonies, or in the more rough and tumble moments, a referee. There aren't many inhibitions. Conversations are loud and excited, and it doesn't matter much what they're about—the children are learning to communicate, aren't they? And anyhow, probably the conversations aren't any more inane than they are at adult cocktail parties. Children should be children, the master of ceremonies of The Playhouse believes. They should never be frustrated. Adult life is complicated and sad, but childhood should be kept happy. So we take the book, and we play-act from the book, and if Johnny can't read the book we don't mind because Johnny can build the scenery, and doesn't Johnny build lovely scenery, and we want to keep Johnny happy, don't we? Maybe Johnny can build scenery all his life and won't ever have to read a dull old book.

So in The Playhouse everybody smiles, everybody laughs. If the teacher is more than just a master of ceremonies, maybe everybody learns, too, but we all know some Playhouse teachers whose students like their classes mainly because teacher is regarded as an easy mark.

The other places we shall visit now are very different from The Playhouse. First is The Doctor's Office. "Open your mouth, dear child," says the Doctor, "and swallow this. You won't like the taste, but it will be good for you." The obedient little children try hard to swallow the medicine, although they sometimes can't resist making a face and even sputtering aloud.

In The Doctor's Office the Doctor is always completely in charge. The child does not know the arcana of literature; the child cannot be right about anything unless his ideas happen to agree completely with the Doctor's. The child whispers, "I think that Milton meant such and such," and the Doctor says, "No, my child. Milton meant so and so." "But how," asks the child, "how can we be sure that Milton meant so and so instead of such and such?" "My child," says the Doctor, "I am reporting to you what almost all the learned Doctors have said. Who are you to argue with the learned Doctors?" "Very well, Sir," the child says. "I shall not argue with the learned Doctors. I don't care what the learned Doctors think. I don't care what Milton meant. I'm going to leave The Doctor's Office. It's too anti-septic and too anti-child. I'm going to go play in the fashionable fissionable sandpile."

We leave The Doctor's Office and journey to The Science Laboratory. It's a very scientific Science Laboratory. It's equipped with microscopes and microscope slides and litmus paper and Bun-

sen burners and all sizes of scalpels and dissecting knives and meat cleavers. In The Science Laboratory everybody spends his time in analysis. There's organic and inorganic, and qualitative and quantitative, and physical and biological, and colloids and glass-blowing, and systematic identification of organic compounds. At this moment that beautiful and significant and highly analyzable poem "Ozymandias" is being wheeled in. Ozymandias lies unmoving, drugged. The teacher and the students wait, scalpels poised. At a signal the dissection begins. Sentence is severed from sentence, line is sliced from line. Each segment is smeared on a slide and gazed at through the microscope, so that the students can discover whether it has any of those interesting bacilli known as similes and metaphors. Bunsen burners, litmus paper, tuning forks, and the laboratory sink are all employed in an attempt to pick out every subject and predicate. Mr. Ozymandias, more torn than Humpty Dumpty, is left scattered around the room when a bell rings. All of Shelley's poetic power can't put him together again. Look on this teacher's work, ye Mighty, and despair. Round the debris of that colossal wreck, ugly and bare, the murky test tubes stand eternally.

Our next to last stop on this unsentimental journey is The Museum. The entryway is a hushed and dusty place. Someone who must be a poet, for he has a beard, glares down from the wall. On the inner Museum door is a sign that says SANCTUM SANCTORUM. The curator, who is a frustrated archeologist, approaches, "Shh," he says, holding a withered finger to his lips. "You are entering the presence of the great spirits. Do not profane that presence. Shh!" In the Museum the present doesn't matter. The future has no appeal. What's past is no prelude to the swelling act; the past is all-important. Into the dustbins of time we plunge, for time's sake only. The curator's motto is "Always look back." Maybe a better one is "Don't look back except to learn."

The Museum contains relics. There are busts of Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Whitman, and the rest, each with a nameplate and a couple of exciting numbers like 1340?-1400. There are lists of poems, or plays, or stories, arranged chronologically. There are gray-bound tomes labeled "History of Literature," for in The Museum one reads about literature more often than he reads literature. A dented suit of armor, perhaps once worn by Sir Gawain, stands in a corner, a skeleton beside it, but nothing alive anywhere near. In jars of formaldehyde are pickled specimens with labels like Petrarchan Sonnet, Mock Heroic, Dramatic Monologue.

Outside The Museum door the children play baseball in the street.

Our last stop is The Torture Chamber. Edgar Allan Poe partially described it in "The Pit and the Pendulum." The walls close in, threatening to squeeze out life. A huge, razor-edged pendulum swings lower and lower above each squirming victim. "Exams!" it whistles with every swish. "Swishexams! Swishexams! Swish-exams!" A phonograph in the corner plays constantly: "You have to learn this or in college you'll flunk! You have to learn this or in college you'll flunk!" How green was my valley and how purple was my heart! "Memorize," says the keeper of the keys. "Read it aloud," says the keeper of the keys, and the child thinks, "I can't read, I don't want to read, and the others don't want me to read because I can't read, and why am I here, and why are they here, and why is there a keeper of the keys when valleys are green, and if liberal arts are supposed to liberate, why are the liberal arts imprisoning me in The Torture Chamber?"

Each of these metaphors is intentionally exaggerated, yet each is a warning against a tendency that all of us have sometimes noticed. The five metaphorical warnings may be summarized in straightforward language like this: 1. Literature is enjoyable, but not all study of literature needs to be made a game. 2. Literature is good for young people, but teachers don't have to keep telling them so. 3. Literature can be studied profitably without constant minute analysis. 4. Since literature is alive, it should be read as something that speaks to us today, not as a collection of dates and other facts. 5. If students are to read literature after they leave our classrooms, they must not be left with the impression that reading a book and being punished are synonymous.

Blustery Memo*

By EDWIN GEORGRICHARD BRUELL

At this frigid portion of the year's solstice, it devolves upon those in charge of student conduct in their varied aspects of behaviorism to issue certain pronouncements pertaining to their deport and decorum.

The subject at hand on this autumnal day pertains to a certain sportive propensity which youth of various sexes, particularly the masculine gender, tends to indulge in—namely that of garnering, making cohesive, and dispensing in various random manners masses of frozen precipitate, commonly termed balls of snow.

While such activity is apt to be indulged in more or less promiscuously by the youth in various climes, particularly in those with such precipitate abounding in free and plentiful supply, it is thought advisable to formulate certain regulations with regard to such behavioral manifestations, to wit:

1. No person shall accrue such masses of precipitation for other than specifically recreational or diversional purposes;
2. Recreational or diversional purposes shall be defined as those wherein an element of wholesome recreation or diversion is intrinsic; viz., no person shall deliberately hurl such missiles with aggressive intent;
3. Aggressive intent, for purposes of clarification here, shall consist of the hurtling of said pellets at: a. Those of hostile inclination toward propellant of said missile; b. Those persons commonly defined as those of the opposite gender; c. Those persons who are regarded as those of administrative, consultative, faculty, or maintenance personnel;
4. Furthermore, said pellets shall not be released at ranges of closer proximity than those destined to inflict no substantial degree of corporal harm on the recipients of said masses. (In general terms, a linear area of one hundred (100) yards shall be considered of relatively innocuous intent);
5. Further, no such released mass shall be hurled at the upper

**Everybody except a few advisers of doctoral candidates—and a few of those whom they advise—now believes that good writing is simple and clear writing. In this gentle spoof Mr. Bruell, who is chairman of the language arts department at Bremen Community High School in Midlothian, illustrates how a nonbeliever might write.*

appendages of the person intended to receive same; i.e., eyes, ears, throat, mouth, nose, hairline. It is recommended that the nether area of the person be considered the most fitting target for the triggered impetus;

6. All such impetus shall be purely of pedal origin; that is, no catapult or other such dexterous mechanical device shall be under any circumstances tolerated;

7. When one member shall voluntarily withdraw himself from the scene of the exterior activity, that person shall be considered no longer a fitting target for such propulsion of such precipitate;

8. Lastly, in general the practice of throwing snowballs shall be discouraged.

IATE Executive Council Meeting

The Executive Council of the IATE will meet at the Sherman Hotel in Chicago on Saturday, March 15, at 9:00 a.m. Officers, district leaders, and committee chairmen are all expected to attend. Other members of the IATE will be welcome as visitors. President Eugene Waffle will chair the meeting.

Following its business meeting, the Council will have lunch with the English Club of Greater Chicago.

Correction

The British Travel Association, whose "Posters of Great Britain" were mentioned on page 9 of *Teaching Aids in the English Language Arts* (the December, 1957, *Bulletin*), informs us that it now has no materials suitable for school use.

Awards to Superior Students in English

Professor Charles W. Roberts of the University of Illinois has been named state chairman of judges for the NCTE Achievement Awards. He and teams of judges from various parts of the state will select 25 of the outstanding English students in Illinois high schools, and 25 runners-up. Each winner will receive a scroll from NCTE and be recommended for a college scholarship.

Professor Roberts is chairman of freshman rhetoric at the U of I, and is a past editor and past treasurer of the IATE.

Teachers who are unfamiliar with the details of the Awards may write NCTE, 704 South Sixth, Champaign, Illinois.